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SUBJECT: STREAMLINING VISA PROCESS FOR IRANIANS WOULD REINFORCE US POLICY GOALS

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DUBAI 00004793 001.2 OF 003

1.(SBU) Summary: In their quest for a visa to visit the United States, Iranian nationals face a number of hurdles, including exorbitant cost of traveling outside Iran for the interview and visa pick-up and long waits for security advisory opinions. Time and financial burdens undermine our message that we stand with the Iranian people and support people-to-people exchanges. AmConGen Dubai's two primary recommendations for alleviating the burden Iranians face during the visa process are: 1) establishing a trusted courier system for visa pick-up; 2) in very specific cases, issuing a two-entry or multiple-entry visa with longer validity. End summary.

The Goal

2.(SBU) The current visa process puts a substantial time and financial burden on Iranian applicants living in Iran, as they must travel to a US embassy or consulate outside of Iran for their visa interview. AmConGen Dubai processes the highest number of non-immigrant visas for Iranians. (Ankara, Istanbul, Nicosia, and Vienna also process a large number.) Iranians represent almost 50% of NIV applicants in Dubai. According to the NIV system on 1 July, AmConGen Dubai had interviewed 6582 Iranian visa applicants since the beginning of the fiscal year on October 1. We issued 2497 visas and refused 3989 applicants (Some of these refusals are actually pending cases waiting for required security clearances). This cable only details the situation for Iranian NIV applicants in Dubai and our suggestions for ways to relieve some of these burdens here. The purpose of such changes would be to send a message of solidarity with the Iranian people that we are not trying to punish them for the behavior of their government. None of these suggestions compromise security measures currently in place.

The Process

3.(SBU) Inhabitants of Iran who want to apply for an NIV in Dubai go through the following steps: 1) schedule an appointment for an interview; 2) obtain a visa to UAE (one very good contact was recently denied a UAE visa); 3) pay for an Iranian exit visa; 4) travel from Iran to Dubai for the interview (Note: All Iranian applicants must appear for a personal interview, including children. endnote); 5) if approved for a visa, Iranian applicants must undergo a security check, which usually takes a minimum of two weeks and can be much longer; 6) once their approval is posted to the website, they have three months to return to Dubai to pick up their visa.

4.(SBU) We do not regularly quiz applicants on the costs involved in applying for a visa, and there are many variables, such as whether or not they need hotel accommodations, how much leave they need from work, and how much help they require from third parties, such as travel agencies, to fill out their paperwork or schedule an appointment. Anecdotally however, we hear that the financial costs for Iranian visa applicants are high. A close contact recently told Conoff that she paid a travel agency approximately \$1000 for the costs related to her visa interview. This fee included: 1) payment of the \$100 visa application fee; 2) one night's lodging at a local three-star hotel; 3) roundtrip airfare from Tehran to Dubai; and 4) a fee for an appointment (discussed below). Additional costs can include help from a travel agency or others in filling out the DS-156 application form electronically, as now required. (Note: the copy center located in the consulate building charges \$40 for each application.)

Problems Getting Appointments Leads to High Costs

5.(SBU) In Dubai, NIV interviews are by appointment only, scheduled via an automatic phone system in Bahrain. The number of Iranian appointments given depends on the number of Farsi-speaking consuls available. Iranians often say they have trouble reaching the Bahrain number - possibly because of some kind of block on calls from Iran - or that when they get through, there are no available appointments in the near future. As a result, they often resort to using a travel agency to book their appointment. We believe switching to the Internet-based appointment system that CA is currently working on will ease many of our current problems with the scheduling process. (Note: The Iranian government could block that website. Iranians regularly report problems accessing State Department websites.)

Hurdles Exist Even After Determined Eligible for Visa

DUBAI 00004793 002.2 OF 003

6.(SBU) Iranian applicants approved for a visa face another hurdle - the security advisory opinion (SAO) or clearance process. This process currently takes an average of three to four weeks, but can often take longer if the applicant is an Iranian government employee (average time at least six weeks) or falls into an area covered by the Technology Alert List (TAL). We have a number of Iranian applicants who have been waiting for more than one year for their clearances.

7.(SBU) Once applicants are cleared by Washington, they have three months in which to pick up their visa. As Iranian law prohibits the mailing of Iranian passports outside the country and we do not want to bear the responsibility of releasing applicants' passports to travel agencies, successful applicants must buy a second plane ticket to Dubai. (Note: one family member can pick up visas for the entire family.) Furthermore, because new mandated facial recognition checks sometimes require 24 hours to process in visa printing, we can no longer offer same day visa pick-up, necessitating at least one night's stay in Dubai. All applicants - Iranian and otherwise - must also be cleared through our local DHS Visa Security Unit before issuance, as required by the Homeland Security Act of 2002. This may require a personal interview and possibly an unexpected extension of their stay in Dubai or a last-minute change to their onward travel plans to the US.

8.(SBU) Successful Iranian visa applicants receive a one entry, three-month visa. Frequent travelers have to repeat all the steps above and pay all the accompanying costs, every time they want a visa. In addition to the resentment this causes, we have seen cases where USG interests have suffered. We know of instances where prominent Iranian activists in the US on J visas have turned down invitations to speak at conferences abroad because of the uncertainty of getting return visas in a timely matter -- if at all. Their participation at such conferences

would have served to highlight their calls for greater democratization in Iran.

Ideas to Lighten the Load for Iranians

9.(SBU) AmConGen Dubai's two primary recommendations for alleviating the burden Iranians face during the visa process are: 1) establishing a trusted courier system for visa pick-up, and 2) in very specific cases, issuing a two-entry or multiple-entry visa with longer validity.

Eliminating a second trip to Dubai

10.(SBU) Embassy Abu Dhabi and ConGen Dubai will switch August 1 to a courier passback service for printed visas through a local courier service, but this is only for applicants with UAE addresses. As mailing passports is illegal under Iranian law, we cannot use this option for most Iranians. We propose, instead, making a formal request to the Swiss Government that the US Interest Section in Tehran begin couriering to us Iranian passports. Approved visa applicants could drop off their passport with the US Interest Section, and the Swiss could send ConGen Dubai -- and possibly other posts -- passports via Swiss diplomatic pouch. In the case of Dubai, the Swiss consulate is located one floor above the consulate in the World Trade Center, making receipt of passports simple. Once the visas were printed, we would return them to the Swiss to return via dip pouch for distribution at the US Interests Section.

11.(SBU) There is precedence for such a system; US passports are already sent to the Interests Section via dip pouch for distribution. In an informal discussion with a Swiss diplomat, he indicated the Swiss would likely be eager to help, if the logistics could be worked out. His primary concern was there could be a large time lag if the Swiss Embassy in Tehran had to send the pouches via Bern. However, even if transmission and return took two weeks, we could offer it as an option. Eliminating or decreasing intake and return of passports in person, and the accompanying constant requests for special treatment and complaints if applicants do not show up at the allotted time, would also be a tremendous time-saver and stress-reliever to the visa section in Dubai.

12.(SBU) We understand that CA and ECA are discussing a pilot program for pre-screening exchange program applicants to cut down trips to Dubai to one. We applaud this initiative. At this time, however, we do not foresee a way to expand such a program to all applicants.

Validity of Visas

DUBAI 00004793 003.2 OF 003

13.(SBU) We urge that in a very limited number of cases where it is deemed to be in the USG interest, we be allowed to request for Iranians a two-entry or multiple-entry visa with longer validity, subject to Department approval. Many of the Iranian visa applicants in Dubai are return applicants who routinely travel to the US. They include students, academics, and professionals traveling to attend conferences, and those traveling to visit family members. Multiple entry visas in very specific cases would dramatically ease the current burden on Iranian visa applicants, as well as on the consular section. At the same time, should there be any new security-related information added to the system at any time about that person, the immigration officer would be able to address the issue on their attempted return to the US.

Visa Processing Time

14.(SBU) Any possible steps to speed up SAO clearance time for Iranians, or even to have an instituted process for requesting

expedited handling of cases deemed to be in USG interest, would be well received. There are numerous cases where prestigious Iranians are left in limbo for many months, or even over a year, with no response on their visa. (reftel)

Scoring PD Points

15.(SBU) Comment: Any improvement in the visa process for Iranians would be a huge public relations boon for the US. Iranians think we refuse them visas or make the process difficult for political reasons. In reality, according to the NIV system, we have issued 2497 visas to Iranians since October 1, representing close to 40 percent of Iranian applicants. Even absent any change to the visa system, it is in our interest to publicize the large or specialized groups of Iranians we allow to visit the US, such as the blind Iranian goal ball team, who were allowed to attend a competition in May, and members of the Iranian soccer team who traveled to the US to participate in a friendly match against a US professional soccer team. The new RPO PAO can help flag future cases for Department attention. At the same time, in our public discourse, we can also call attention to cases where Americans are denied visas to Iran by the Iranian government.

BURNS